

The Election of 1864

Presented by: Jeff Padnos

Preparing for this paper has been what we might call an “old-school” experience, in that I picked a topic that I wanted to learn more about, and did not know what I would learn or what I would say when I started. I am pleased to say that I learned a lot, and that some of what I learned made me feel better. More important, none of what I learned made me feel worse. I must admit that I was worried about that for a while. So I would like to share some of what I learned this evening, and we will save plenty of time for questions and comments.

When I am asked about where I am from, I usually reply that I am from a very politically conservative area.

“How conservative is it?” you might ask.

Well, we are so conservative, that the only time when my home of Ottawa County in Michigan did not vote for a Republican in a presidential election, was in the election of 1864, when we did not vote for Abraham Lincoln the second time.

I had heard that said a few times some years back, but I felt it was a pretty significant statement. I wanted to verify that it was really true, especially if I was going to repeat it. I could never find confirmation on the Internet, although I probably just didn’t know where to look. Then by chance I happened to meet the Clerk and Register of Deeds for Ottawa County, Justin Roebuck. Talk about a chance encounter, I think I was attending a Holland Arts Council “Frozen Fundraiser” outside on a January evening in back of the New Holland Brewery. When I went inside to warm up, I encountered an OC Republican meeting, where I met Justin. When I learned he was a self-described “political nerd” and history buff, I asked him about our Ottawa County election history. He said it was true, and that he had the records to prove it.

So this summer I visited Justin at his office on Fillmore in West Olive (slide 1).



There he is, in his office with the record book on his desk. The next slide (slide 2)



shows a couple of pages from the book where the election totals are recorded with beautiful penmanship. You will notice that the name Abraham Lincoln does not appear anywhere. The votes cast were for the electors. There were 1536 votes for each of the eight electors committed to General McClellan, and 1345 votes for each of the eight electors committed to the incumbent, Abraham Lincoln, for the total shown of 23,048 votes. There were only 2881 voters casting ballots in that election, but that was a high percentage of those eligible.

It was very nice of Justin to take the time to show all this to me, and we had a wide ranging discussion of local politics and political history. I'm happy to say that I was able to reciprocate a little, and answer a question that Justin had. I mentioned that I had been quite conservative when I was younger, and that I even had a BaAuH₂O sweatshirt back in 1964. Justin was surprised when I said that. On his desk was a coffee mug that his sister had given him in recognition of his "political nerd" status. It had bumper stickers from many previous presidential elections on it, including one that said simply BaAuH₂O. He did not know what that meant. (He's young!). I happily explained. Then I went back to our cottage and found the sweatshirt. I had a photo snapped of me wearing it (slide 3),

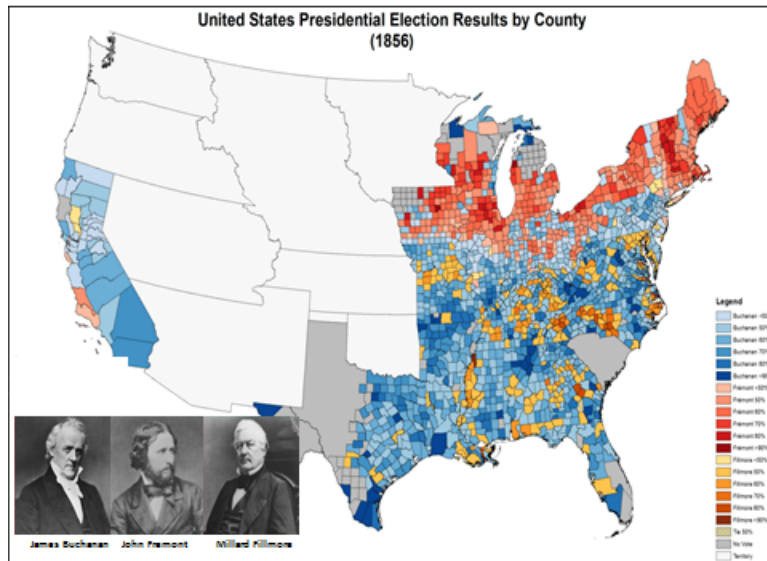


and emailed it to him, along with some more history. In the background is a copy of a famous photo of the entrance to Lake Macatawa. Above that is a painting done by my mother when Big Red was being painted red! That was in 1948, and my mother was carrying me when she did the painting.

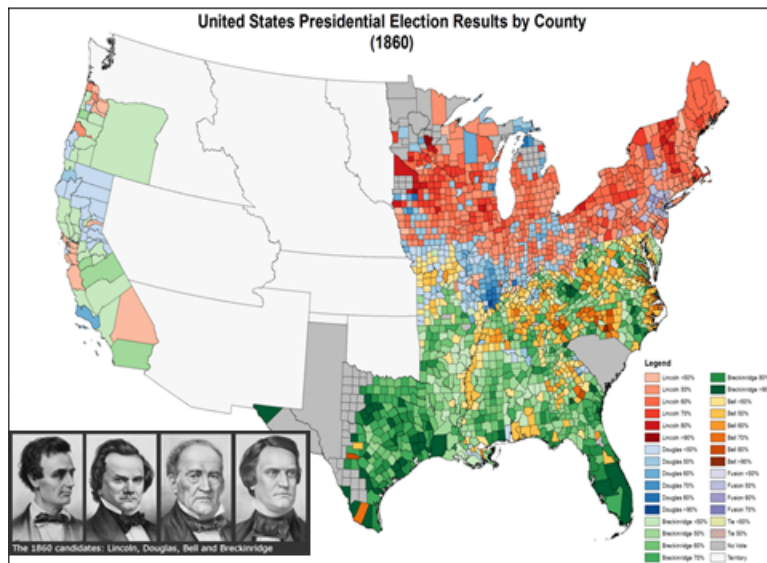
As an added coincidence, it hit me that the election at issue on my sweatshirt was in 1964, exactly 100 years after our topic tonight. When I reflect that my uncle, Seymour Padnos, will turn 99 next month, and that his aunt Florence died earlier this summer on her 106th birthday, it makes 1864 seem like not such a long time ago.

OK let's return to that era and review a few facts to put those Ottawa County

election results in perspective. First I learned that Wikipedia now has county by county results for each election. Here's (slide 4) the result for 1856.



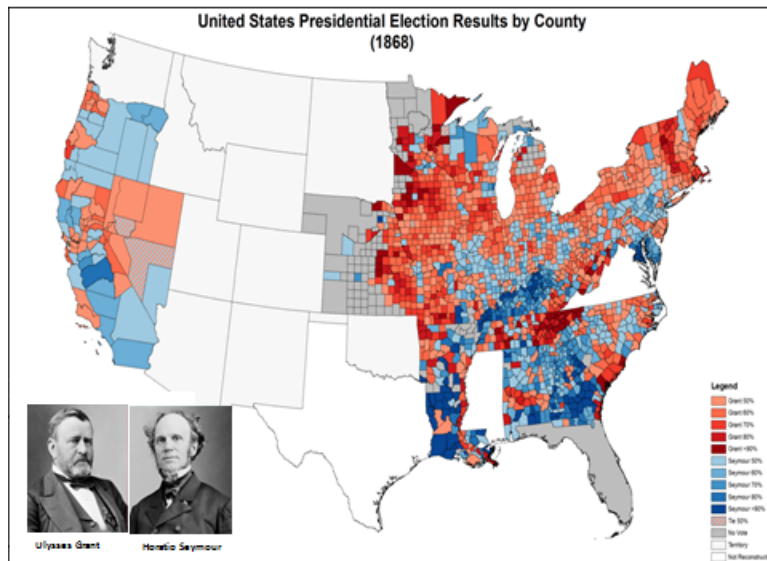
You'll notice that Ottawa County is not so easy to find with all those straight line county borders. I learned that Muskegon County was formed in 1859 by carving out the northern part of Ottawa County, plus I believe the southern part of Oceana. In any event Ottawa County went for John Fremont, the Republican, in the election in which James Buchanan won his single term in office. In 1860, (slide 5)



we see Ottawa County with its familiar little extension in the upper right corner, and we can see that Ottawa County went for Lincoln.

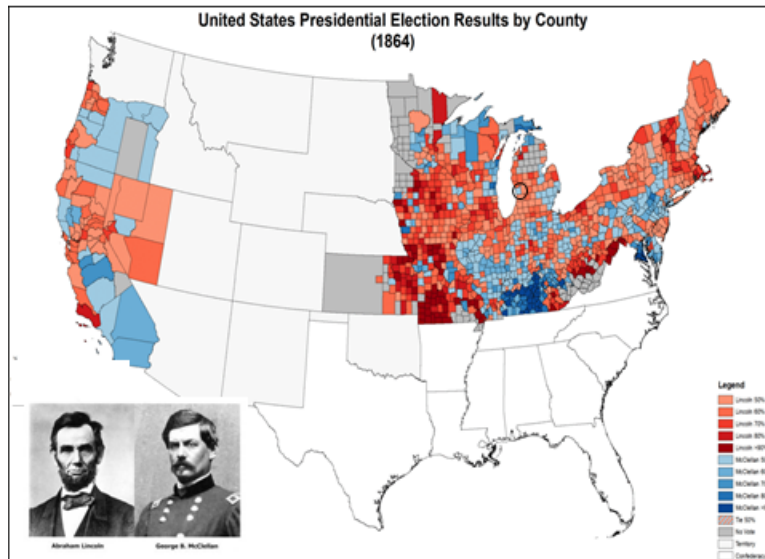
We got that little hook up in the corner when it was determined that if the county line were drawn in the customary straight edge manner, Muskegon would have had one more political jurisdiction than Ottawa. Since Ottawa was the pre-existing county this was an unacceptable slight. So Ottawa was permitted to select one more Township. The Ottawa leaders would not be induced to select low valued lakefront land (Norton Shores, I believe). Instead, they went for Chester Township, with its excellent rich farmland. So it goes.

Moving to 1868 (slide 6)



we see that Ottawa County again went Republican, for General Grant, and has gone for the Republican in every subsequent election since then.

But back to 1864, here it is (slide 7).



So many interesting things about this map starting of course with the stark reminder that we were in the midst of the Civil War and none of the southern states voted. Actually I learned that two southern states voted, Tennessee and Louisiana, because they were by that time under Union control. They both went for Lincoln, but their electoral votes were not counted.

But look at Ottawa County. A lone blue dot in a sea of red. Some today might consider that a fantasy (for then or for now!). But it must be true, because I found it on the Internet. (Plus did confirm it, as you saw!).

So I had fulfilled the first part of my quest. I had confirmed that it was true: the only time that Ottawa County did not vote for a Republican in a presidential election was in 1864, when we did not vote for Abraham Lincoln in his bid for re-election.

But what was the story behind the headline? This was where I was a little nervous about what I would learn.

First let's set a national context. Most obviously, we were in the middle of the Civil War, a pivotal point in our nation's history. Slavery, "property rights," basic human rights, abolitionism, war progress or lack of it, and general war fatigue were central issues of the day. When I started this paper, the New York Times story about the 1619 Project, calling for a national project to re-educate ourselves about the true history of slavery, and its penetration into every aspect of American history and culture, had not yet come out. I already thought I was naive and ignorant on the topic, and that assessment actually overstates my grasp of the subject. (Another possible future topic: there are many who still willfully do not want to know). Here are just a few glimpses to provide broad strokes of context.

1. Slavery and the status of slaves as property were embedded in our Constitution from the very beginning. Even in so-called free states, the vast majority respected the so-called property rights of slave-owners.
2. Many northern states passed resolutions confirming these slave-holding rights. In 1835, the Illinois General Assembly resolved that "we highly disapprove of the formation of abolition societies" and affirm the "right of property in slaves." The vote was 77-6.
3. Abraham Lincoln was one of the 6. This was in his first term, at age 26, after he had been defeated in a prior run for that office. One writer, quoted by Doris Kearns Goodwin in her book, "Leadership in Turbulent Times," (p17) called this "a bold thing to do, in a day when to be an anti-slavery man, even at the North, was to be a sort of social outcast and political pariah."
4. This one incident from Lincoln's life illustrates not only the overall tenor of the times before the Civil War but also provides one small glimpse of what an incredible person Abraham Lincoln was. It is something we all "know," but whatever we think we know falls short of true understanding. (Evil of slavery vs courage and skill of Lincoln).
5. We think of the Emancipation Proclamation as freeing slaves, effective 1/1/1863 (announced 9/22/1862). But it only freed the slaves in the Confederate States at war vs the Union. It was enacted under War Powers.

It did not affect 4 border slave states that did not secede. (Ky, Md, Del and Mo) nor areas under Union control, including much of Tennessee, what became W VA, area around New Orleans, and parts of Texas. One critic — he freed slaves where we don't control the land. Where we do, he did not.

6. War fatigue was widespread. Many were willing to compromise on slavery just to get the war ended. Democrats picked George McClellan, a former general, very popular with the soldiers, as their candidate because they perceived soldier vote would be important. His platform staunchly supported maintaining the Union, but was willing to separate and compromise on the issue of abolition. Doris Kearns Goodwin (p239) quoted a democratic activist as saying “we are as certain of 2/3 of that (soldier) vote for General McClellan as that the sun shines.”

Now let's look more closely at Holland and Ottawa County. In this I was guided by selections from a massive three volume tome by Robert Swierenga: “Holland Michigan: From Dutch Colony to Dynamic City,” as well as interviews with local history buffs including Justin Roebuck, the aforementioned County Clerk, County Administrator Al Vanderberg, former Holland Mayor, Al McGeehan, and Hope Emeritus Professor of History, Bill Cohen.

If I ever knew that in its earliest days, Holland voters generally voted for Democrats, I had certainly forgotten it. But that was the case. Three factors explain this. First, none of the early Dutch settlers in Holland were eligible to vote in the Netherlands. They did not meet the property owning requirement that prevailed at the time. So they looked for guidance on political matters to their leader, Albertus Van Raalte. Van Raalte in turn had been guided in finding land for Holland and in becoming established by prominent citizens who were Democrats, including Judge Kellogg of Allegan and Senator Lewis Cass. So, at least in the beginning, virtually the entire community of Dutch settlers followed Van Raalte's lead in voting Democratic.

A second factor was that the early Republican Party (formed in 1854) was understandably seen as the successor to the Whig Party. And the Whigs had not been helpful when it came to the biggest thing our area was seeking from the Federal Government. That was River and Harbor appropriations, particularly for Holland Harbor. Obviously I have a personal interest in reminding people that a viable commercial harbor was one of the very highest priorities for the first settlers here. But it was true!

As things developed, neither party was as helpful as might have been hoped or expected. In particular, a no vote by Senator Lewis Cass was a major disappointment, virtually a betrayal.

But by far the biggest factor in the early area support for the Democratic Party was an issue still familiar to us today —immigration. If you can imagine it, the Republican Party was perceived to be anti-immigration! Obviously not a good thing if you are an immigrant. (Comment?)

To compound this, associated with anti-immigrant policies was a strong push for prohibiting alcohol production and sales. A Whig-backed law was actually passed in the Michigan legislature in 1853 that would have banned manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, including even communion wine. This law was subject to approval by a vote of the people. A Reverend in the area declared that it was a mistake to “Try to effect by law that which can only be effected by the gospel.” (Quoted by Swierenga p1675). The proposal was voted down by more than 3 to 1 in Holland and 5 to 1 in Zeeland. It passed state wide but was later overturned by courts on a technicality.

But all these issues were eventually overcome by the passions surrounding the issue of slavery. Van Raalte had opposed slavery even before leaving the Netherlands. Swierenga suspects that Van Raalte may have been a “closet Republican” as early as 1857 (hard because no secret ballot). However by 1859, Van Raalte and many other ministers were openly and avidly Republicans. In fact Van Raalte became so avid that he was criticized for bringing politics into the pulpit. His reply (Swierenga p 1686) was “that he was a citizen before he was a minister,” and that slavery, especially “breeding men” was “absolutely forbidden in the Bible. “Nevertheless his political activism was not defended by his church consistory, and was not widely accepted in town. Holland did not vote for Lincoln in 1860, but the margin was small (208-187 = 53%-47%). However, Ottawa County went for Lincoln by 197 votes, thus preserving 1864 as the one exception in our voting history.

Based on my limited readings, my opinion is that the close vote in 1860 reflected the history of bad will built by the Whigs and Republicans for their anti-immigrant (and anti-alcohol) policies. We were clearly moving toward the Republican Party.

So what disrupted the progress and caused the one exception in our Republican

history? Clearly it was not a lack of union fervor, nor was it any sympathy for slavery. Swierenga (p1692) attributes the Republican loss in 1864 to “the depth of the hurt inflicted on the Dutch in the mid-1850s by Whig and Republican nativists.”

That is no doubt part of the story. But here’s an added explanation, resulting from an interview with our former mayor. Al McGeehan explained that of all the states in the union, Michigan sent the highest percentage of its eligible men to join the Union army of any state in the nation. And moreover, Ottawa County sent the highest percentage of its eligible men into service of any county in the State of Michigan. Swierenga says that there was a ratio of one soldier for every 10 residents of Holland Township in the early war years. War fatigue was a big issue, and the Democrats promised an earlier end to the war. But Al provided an additional insight that makes a lot of sense to me. In 1863 the Union was not getting sufficient troops from voluntary enlistments. So the government took additional initiatives, including a wildly unpopular draft. That draft led to severe riots in NYC. In fact train loads of Union troops, still in their clothes bloody from the battle of Gettysburg, were sent to New York City to put down the uprising. Also initiated was a signing bonus of \$300. This \$300 was at the same time as a soldier’s pay was \$13 per month! That \$300 was also the amount a wealthy person could pay to avoid the draft, and send someone in his place. Moreover, the tax to pay the \$300 was levied at the county level. So, Al suggests, there was most likely huge resentment that the citizens of our county, who had from the very outset of war volunteered so much to support the Union, would now have to pay an additional tax to make up for the shortcomings of others.

That’s one subject on which we have been consistent throughout our history: we do not like taxes!!

A couple more comments about this part of our history. Earlier I quoted a Democratic Party activist who was totally confident that selecting McClellan as the candidate would lock in the very important army vote. Lincoln’s attachment to the troops was much deeper and personal than a simple political calculation. He is quoted (Kearns p240) as saying he “would rather be defeated with a soldier vote behind (him) than to be elected without it.”

Despite knowing that by voting for Lincoln, the soldiers were essentially voting to prolong their service in the war, more than seven in ten soldiers voted for Lincoln. And that record applied to soldiers from our area as well. Albertus Van Raalte had two sons who served in the Union army. One, Dirk, lost an arm in combat. Swierenga quotes a letter from his other son, Ben, serving with the 25th

Michigan Regiment in Tennessee to his father: (note 76 p1692) “The Hollander (a local newspaper) was wrong when it said that the company was all Democrats. 30 were for Lincoln, and nine for Mac.” (Letter was in Dutch, translated by Clarence Jalving).

So there we have it. Our historical factoid about our County’s voting history is true and can be used as a source of humor, or poking fun at ourselves. But as we have seen, we can explain a lot of this history, and we have a lot about which we can be proud.

So what does that tell us about today?

We can see analogies in the tumultuous issues. Slavery was embedded in our Constitution, and it took a constitutional amendment to end it. Gun rights are also embedded in our constitution.

And although the analogy is imperfect, the issues of abortion rights and slavery both evoked religious passions of the highest order.

Obviously the 1860s were terrible times and we believe we live in terrible times today. Jon Meacham, in a recent book, *The Soul of America*, says (p275) “humankind is forever coping with crisis, or believes it is, and will until what William Faulkner described as ‘the last red and dying evening.’”

I have no desire this evening to try to match the prescient observations about our current president so ably presented by John Donnelly last year. I recently heard a minister describe the feelings that can overcome people talking or thinking about current leadership in this country as “Moral nausea.” That seems apt to me. I know I had to resist that feeling at times as I was working on this paper. For those of us who have ever been badly seasick or nauseous, we know that nausea makes us want to do nothing more than lie down, curl up into a ball, and do absolutely nothing. But that is exactly what we must NOT do.

Peg and I heard Jon Meacham speak at Grand Valley year ago. He quoted Samuel Taylor Coleridge as saying “history is like a lantern on the stern.” But Meacham says the lantern needs to be on the bow. There are so many stories from history that can guide and inspire us, and every action we take is just that much better than doing nothing. At the conclusion of his book, Meacham urges readers to stay involved. He says:

1. Enter the Arena.
Politics is a mirror of public sentiment.
Trump — divisive even after winning
2. Resist tribalism
He quotes Eleanor Roosevelt referring to “tribal self-certitude.”
3. Respect facts and deploy reason.
Harry Truman quoted a saying referring to Hitler that if you lie enough people will eventually believe you. Truman responded “well, if you tell the truth long enough, they’ll believe that too.”
But history tells us that reform is a slow process, not for the faint of heart or the impatient.
4. Find a critical balance
It is essential to be well informed. Teddy Roosevelt quoted (Bentham) “publicity is the soul of justice.”

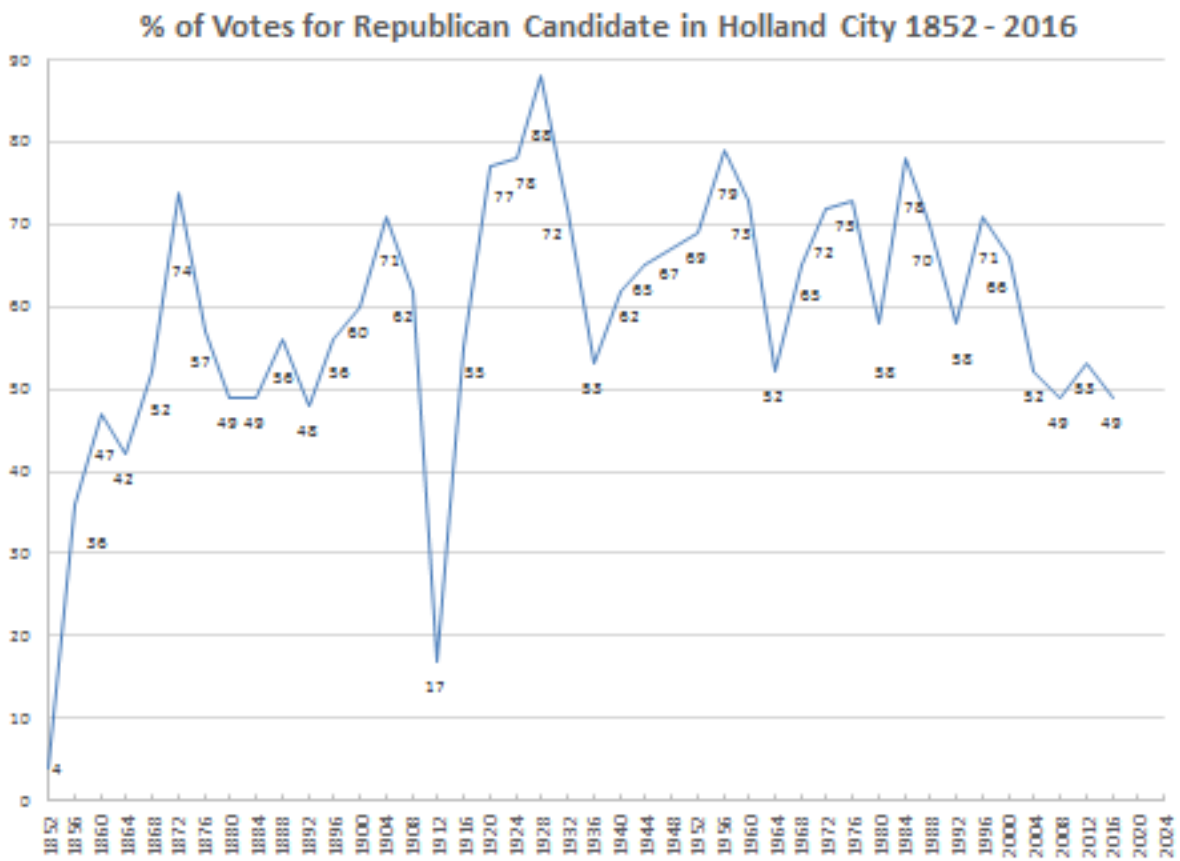
To these I might add:

5. Don’t spend all your time “preaching to the choir.” Step out of your silo or tribe, and try to find constructive ways to engage with people with whom you disagree.
6. In doing this, remember a lesson from a humorous but insightful book “How to Tame a Man.” It was written by a woman who trains wild animals. She says that the key idea is to reward the behavior you want, and ignore the behavior you don’t. Because you won’t teach a seal to balance a ball on the end of his nose by nagging him .
7. Don’t blame people for once having had different views or for evolving and changing their mind over time.

Meacham’s central message quotes Lincoln’s inaugural address. It acknowledges that both good and evil impulses are in all of us and certainly in our society but that we must always struggle to encourage our better angels.

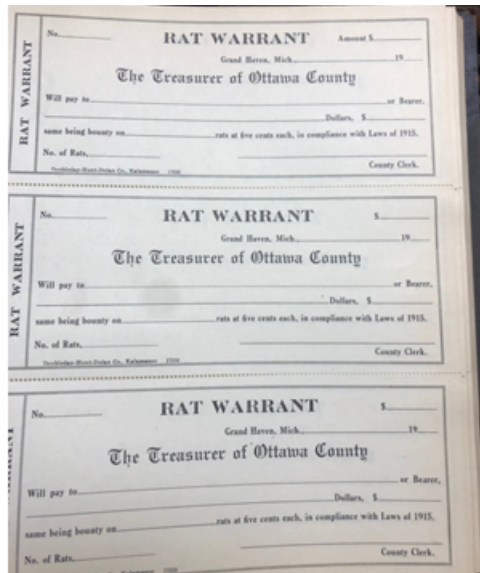
Religion teaches us that we do not necessarily have to finish the task but we cannot fail to take it up. And to be encouraged to take every small step that we can because if you save a single life it's like you've saved a whole world.

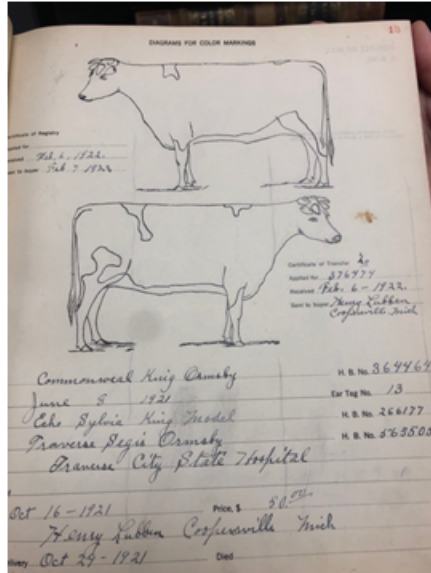
Supplemental Information:



Supplemental Photos from Ottawa County Data “Vault”







Sources:

1. Goodwin, Doris Kearns, *Leadership in Turbulant Times*, Simon & Schuster, 2018
2. Meacham, Jon, *The Soul of America*, Random House, 2018
3. Swierenga, Robert P., Van Raalte Press, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014
Holland Michigan: From Dutch Colony to Dynamic City,
4. Interviews with:

Bill Cohen, Emertius Professor of History at Hope College
 Al McGeehan, Former Mayor, City of Holland
 Justin Roebuck, Clerk of Ottawa County
 Al Vanderberg, Ottawa County Administrator